DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 412 648 EA 028 726

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TITLE Associations between School Environment and Environment in Religion Classes in Australian Catholic High Schools.
PUB DATE 1997-03-00
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL, March 24-28, 1997).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150) -- Tests/Questionnaires (160)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Catholic Schools; Data Collection; *Educational Environment; Foreign Countries; *High School Students; High Schools; Qualitative Research; *Religious Education; Research Methodology; *Secondary School Students
IDENTIFIERS *Australia

ABSTRACT

This paper describes a study of links between school environment and classroom environment in Catholic high schools in Australia. A sample of 893 students in 40 grade-9 and grade-12 religious education classes and 80 teachers of religious education in Catholic high schools was used to assess 4 dimensions of school environment (Empowerment, Student Support, Affiliation, and Mission Consensus) and 3 dimensions of classroom environment in high schools (Student Affiliation, Interactions, and Cooperation). Associations between these dimensions of school and classroom environment were investigated using simple, multiple, and canonical correlation analyses. In general, results indicated weak relationships between school and classroom environment, and they reinforced the view that characteristics of school environment were not transmitted automatically into religion classrooms. An appendix contains the school and classroom environment questionnaires. (Contains 4 tables and 31 references.) (Author/SLD)

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ED 412 648

ASSOCIATIONS BETWEEN SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT AND ENVIRONMENT IN RELIGION CLASSES IN AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC HIGH SCHOOLS

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EA 028 226

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Abstract

This paper describes a study of links between school environment and classroom environment in Catholic high schools. A sample of 893 students in 40 grade 9 and grade 12 religious education classes and 80 teachers of religious education in Catholic high schools were used to assess four dimensions of school environment (viz. Empowerment, Student Support, Affiliation, and Mission Consensus) and three dimensions of classroom environment in high schools (viz. Student Affiliation, Interactions, Cooperation). Associations between these dimensions of school and classroom environment were investigated using simple, multiple and canonical correlational analyses. In general, results indicated weak relationships between school and classroom environment and they reinforced the view that characteristics of the school environment are not transmitted automatically into religion classrooms.

Background

An implicit assumption of many administrators and teachers involved in Australian Catholic education is that Catholic schools possess a distinctive ethos. Indeed, the existence of such an ethos is much touted as the central distinguishing characteristic of contemporary Catholic schools. Therefore, an important consideration of any Catholic school is the extent to which its *lived curriculum* reflects the Catholic ethos. One important aspect of a school's lived curriculum is the psychosocial learning environment that students and teachers experience. Psychosocial environment refers to those aspects of the environment that have a social bearing either in origin or outcomes rather than the physical environment of a particular setting (Boy & Pine, 1988). Used in this context, environment refers to the atmosphere, tone or climate and essentially probes students and teachers on the question 'What is it like to be in this environment'?

The purpose of the present research was to use the advances made in learning environment research to investigate one particular issue, namely, to what extent is there a relationship between school environment and environment in religious education classrooms. This matter is of considerable importance to Catholic church and school administrators because much effort has focused on generating and maintaining a school environment that emphasises Christian community based on Gospel values. Although Church and Australian church documents since Vatican II have emphasised the overall school environment, little emphasis has been placed on the distinguishing characteristics of a Catholic school classroom (see e.g., Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988; Queensland Catholic Education Commission, 1977; Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977). There appears to be an assumption that characteristics of the school environment are automatically translated into the classroom. Is this assumption sustainable? This issue is of fundamental importance to Catholic education because students spend most of their school time working with teachers in classrooms. Religion classes are often touted as the most important lessons of the school routine. Therefore, it is appropriate to use these classes as the source of classroom environment data. One could reasonably expect religion lessons to have a better chance of demonstrating the Catholic ethos compared to any other class because of the significant degree of curriculum freedom afforded to these classes.

The research reported in this paper was distinctive for three reasons. First, it was the first Australian study to investigate this issue in Catholic schools. In fact, only a few studies worldwide have explored associations between school-level environment and classroom environment. Second, the study employed two specially developed and validated instruments for the assessment of some dimensions of school and classroom environment in Catholic schools. That is, the instruments were context-specific. Third, the study obtained data from students and teachers in different types of Catholic schools (viz. coeducational, single-sex boys, single-sex girls) and different grade levels (grade 9, grade 12). Because the research reported in this paper builds upon and extends the strong tradition of research of classroom and school environment evident internationally over the last quarter of a century, the following section is devoted to a short review of recent developments in the field of learning environment research.

Prior Learning Environment Research

School Environment

There is a generally accepted view that a good school environment enhances student outcomes. According to Anderson (1982), previous studies indicate that school environment influences student cognitive and affective outcomes (Brookover et al., 1978; Ellett & Walberg, 1979), student values (Vyskocil & Goens, 1979) and student personal growth and satisfaction (Coyne, 1975). Although the field of school environment research has shown limited progress since the highly productive 1960s and 1970s, many recent studies and models of school effectiveness have incorporated school environment or climate as one factor contributing to school effectiveness (e.g. McGaw, Piper, Banks, & Evans, 1993).

A number of studies conducted in the 1960s and 1970s investigated school environment dimensions as criterion variables. For example, rapport between staff and administration was found to be positively related to school environment in studies conducted by the New York State Department (1976) and Ellett and Walberg (1979). The link between school environment and student outcomes does not appear to be as strong or as direct as that between classroom environment and student outcomes. For example, Ellett and Walberg used a variety of instruments to show that principal behaviour did affect student outcomes, but that this relationship was mediated through the influence of teachers and other factors in the school environment. In general, despite the voluminous nature of school environment research in the 1960s and 1970s, there remains some scepticism about the link between school environment and student outcomes.

Classroom Environment

In contrast to the limited research efforts involving school environment over the past 20 years, the field of classroom environment research has shown considerable growth. The strongest tradition of this research has involved investigation of associations between student cognitive and affective outcomes and their perceptions of the learning environment (Henderson, Fisher, & Fraser, 1994; McRobbie & Fraser, 1993). Haertel, Walberg and Haertel's (1981) meta-analysis of 634 correlations from 823 classes in eight subject areas comprising 17 805 students in four nations provided strong support for the predictive validity of student perceptions of classroom environment in accounting for appreciable amounts of variance in learning outcomes. Enhanced student achievement was found in classes characterised by greater Cohesiveness, Satisfaction and Goal Direction and less Disorganisation and Friction.

Recent studies confirm the link between classroom environment and student outcomes. McRobbie and Fraser's (1993) study used a sample of 92 chemistry classes in Brisbane high schools to establish overall relationships between learning outcomes and dimensions of the science laboratory classroom environment assessed by the Science Laboratory Environment Inventory (SLEI). In Singapore, Wong and Fraser (1994) employed the SLEI to establish positive associations between Student Cohesiveness, Integration, Rule Clarity and Material Environment and students' attitudes to chemistry.

Some areas of contemporary classroom environment research include assessing computer-assisted learning environments (Maor & Fraser, in press), using classroom environment assessments to assist school psychologists (Burden & Fraser, 1993), exploring the relationship between teacher personality and interpersonal teacher behaviour (Fisher, Fraser, & Kent, 1995), investigating gendered learning environments in single-sex and mixed-sex classes (Rennie & Parker, 1996) and exploring links between students' cultural factors and students' perceptions of the learning environment (Levy, Wubbels, & Brekelmans, 1996; Waldrip & Fisher, 1996). Other studies have investigated the influence of a host of independent variables on classroom environment: class size, grade level, student gender, teacher gender, subject matter and school type (see Fraser, 1986, 1994). These studies highlight the growing recognition of the learning environment as a central component of the lived curriculum of schools.

Links Between School and Classroom Environment

Much effective schools literature has suggested that both school-level and classroom-level factors promote student achievement. For example, Bossert (1988) reported that schools which are successful (in terms of student achievement) have these characteristics:

- a school climate conducive to learning — one free of disciplinary problems and vandalism;
- a schoolwide emphasis on basic skills instruction;
- teachers who hold high expectations for all students to achieve;
- a system of clear instructional objectives for monitoring and assessing students' performances; and
- a school principal who is a strong programmatic leader and who sets high standards, observes classrooms frequently, maintains student discipline, and creates incentives for learning. (Bossert, 1988, p. 346)

Despite the fact that characteristics like Bossert's invariably involve both school and classroom factors, few studies have investigated links between school-level variables and classroom-level variables. In the main, the fields of school environment and classroom environment have remained quite independent. Thus, the present study of associations between school-level and classroom-level environment is distinctive and important.

Three previous studies that assessed classroom and school environment separately were conducted by Fraser and Rentoul (1982), Idiris and Fraser (1994), and Fisher, Fraser and Wubbels (1993). The Australian study conducted by Fisher, Fraser and Wubbels found weak relationships between aspects of classroom teacher interaction and dimensions of the school-level environment. Collectively, these studies highlight the distinction between classroom and school environment and suggest that a tight linkage between school and classroom environment might not always exist. The purpose of the present study was to shed further light on this important issue by focussing on Australian Catholic schools and their religion classes.

TABLE 1
DESCRIPTION OF STUDENT SAMPLE BY GRADE LEVEL AND SCHOOL TYPE

	Sample Size							
	Co-educational Schools		Girls' Schools		Boys' Schools		Total	
Grade	Classes	Students	Classes	Students	Classes	Students	Classes	Students
Grade 9	10	228	5	108	5	108	20	444
Grade 12	10	237	5	107	5	105	20	449
Total	20	465	10	215	10	213	40	893

Design of Present Study

Sample

This study involved assessment of student perceptions of classroom environment and teacher perceptions of school environment. A total of 893 students in 40 grade 9 and grade 12 religion classes responded to the classroom environment questionnaire. The classes were drawn from 20 Catholic high schools (10 coeducational, 5 girls' and 5 boys' schools) located in metropolitan Brisbane and provincial centres of Queensland. The 40 teachers of these classes together with another 40 teachers of religion from these 20 schools answered the school environment questionnaire. Table 1 describes the student sample by grade level and school type.

Assessment of School and Classroom Environments

Because this research was conducted in Queensland Catholic high schools, it was considered important to devise context specific instruments relevant to Catholic schooling. Consistent with the conceptualisation of school and classroom environment as separate entities, two instruments — one for the assessment of school-level environment and the other for the assessment of classroom-level environment — needed to be developed.

School Environment Instrument. A 34-item instrument that assesses student perceptions of the school-level environment in Catholic high schools was developed. These items are classified into one of four scales, namely, Empowerment, Student Support, Affiliation, and Mission Consensus. Teachers respond to the questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale (Strongly Agree, Strongly Agree, Neither/ Not Sure, Disagree, Strongly Disagree). Validation data collected in the present study revealed that each of these scales had good internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's coefficient alpha) and minimal scale overlap (using the mean correlation of a scale with the remaining three scales as a convenient index). Table 2 shows common sense scale description, internal consistency reliability and mean correlation for each school environment scale.

TABLE 2
DESCRIPTIVE INFORMATION AND VALIDATION DATA
FOR THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT INSTRUMENT

Scale	Scale Description	Alpha Coefficient	Mean Correlation
Empowerment	The extent to which teachers are empowered and encouraged to be involved in decision making processes.	.88	.34
Student Support	There is good rapport between teachers and students and students behave in a responsible manner.	.83	.28
Affiliation	Teachers can obtain assistance, advice and encouragement and are made to feel accepted by colleagues.	.84	.32
Mission Consensus	The extent to which consensus exists within the staff with regard to the overarching goals of the school.	.84	.38

TABLE 3
DESCRIPTIVE INFORMATION AND VALIDATION DATA
FOR THE CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT INSTRUMENT

Scale Name	Scale Description	Alpha Coefficient	Mean Correlation
Student Affiliation	Extent to which students know, help and are friendly towards each other.	.69	.22
Interactions	Extent to which teacher-student interactions emphasise a Christian concern for the personal welfare and social growth of the student.	.90	.29
Cooperation	Extent to which students cooperate rather than compete with each other.	.71	.28

Classroom Environment Instrument. A three-scale classroom environment instrument with 29 items was developed. The three dimensions assessed by the instrument were Student Affiliation, Interactions and Cooperation. Validation procedures employed in the development of these scales were analogous to procedures used for the school environment instrument (see Dorman, 1994; Dorman, Fraser, & McRobbie, 1995). The instrument was similar to the school environment questionnaire with a five-point Likert response format. Scale descriptions and validation data are shown in Table 3. Copies of the school and classroom environment instruments used in this study are contained in Appendix A of this paper.

Data Analysis

To indicate the strength of the relationship between school and classroom environment, simple, multiple and canonical correlational analyses were performed on the data. Classroom environment data from students (40 student class means) were compared with

school environment data from the sample of 80 teachers (converted to 40 teacher school means). A simple correlational analysis was used to investigate the relationship between each classroom environment scale and each school environment scale. A multiple correlation analysis explored the joint influence of the set of school environment scales on each classroom environment dimension. Canonical correlation was used to establish the strength of the relationship between the set of three classroom environment scales and the set of four school environment scales.

Results

Table 4 shows the results of these analyses. Two of the 12 simple correlations between the three classroom environment scales and four school environment scales were statistically significant, a result which is about triple that which could be expected by chance. Increased levels of Student Support in the school environment were associated with higher levels of Student Affiliation and Cooperation in religion classes. However, none of the four school environment scales was linked significantly with Interactions in religion classes. The three multiple correlational analyses (one for each classroom environment scale) supported these findings with Student Support in the school environment predicting Student Affiliation and Cooperation in religion classes. Canonical correlational analysis failed to establish a significant relationship between the set of four school environment scales and the set of three classroom environment scales.

Discussion

This paper has reported research investigating the link between school-level and environment in religion classes in Queensland Catholic high schools. This research represents one of few studies attempting to bring the fields of school environment and classroom environment closer together. In line with past research, this study involving 40 classes and 80 teachers revealed weak associations between school and religion classroom environment. The results of the present study are consistent with the recent Australian study by Fisher, Fraser and Wubbels (1993) discussed earlier in this paper.

TABLE 4
SIMPLE AND MULTIPLE CORRELATIONS BETWEEN THREE CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT SCALES AND FOUR SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT SCALES
(N = 40 class means for classroom environment and 40 averaged teacher responses for school environment)

Classroom Environment Scale	School Environment Scale				Multiple Correlation
	Empowerment	Student Support	Affiliation	Mission Consensus	
Student Affiliation	-.08	.34*	-.03	.16	.47*
Interactions	-.15	.20	-.02	-.04	.29
Cooperation	.07	.38*	-.16	.12	.48*

* $p < .05$

This study does not support the view that school environment strongly influences classroom environment. It calls into question the emphasis by school administrators and traditional approaches to educational administration that view good management practices as critical to improving student outcomes (see Sergiovanni, 1987). The implicit assumption of this literature is that a school-level ethos will manifest itself in classrooms through a *trickle down* effect. Clearly, management practices that generate a particular school-level environment are not irrelevant to classroom environment but their impact is probably not as great as once thought.

All Catholic schools seek to promote an overall school ethos that directs the attitudes and behaviours of students and teachers. An implicit assumption in the rhetoric of Catholic schools is that the Catholic ethos is transmitted into the classroom. However, the results of the present study suggest that classrooms, even religion classrooms, do not automatically reflect characteristics of the school-level environment. To some extent, it would appear that classrooms are insulated from the world outside. This is not unexpected for it is quite plausible that the overall school environment will be of lesser concern to teachers than the environments of their classrooms. In terms of demarcation, school environments concern school administrators whereas classroom environments concern teachers.

That school environment does not influence strongly classroom environment suggests that renewal of classroom teachers is vital if the Catholic ethos is to manifest itself in classrooms. In recent times, much effort has been directed at requiring administrators to have post-graduate qualifications that focus on the purpose and ethos of the Catholic school (McLaughlin, 1995). Although a noble exercise, this effort may be misplaced and largely ineffective because such courses may miss the real target group. That is, such courses might be "preaching to the converted". In essence, the idea that administrators are the target group assumes that the efforts of the principal at the school level can be transmitted into the classroom. The present research calls into question this assumption. We should not lose sight of the fact that Catholic schools and indeed all schools exist for students and not administrators.

Given the fact that much research of the past two decades has shown classroom environment to be a strong determinant of student outcomes, Catholic school administrators probably will be alarmed by the present research because it implies that school-level environment exerts relatively little influence on classroom environment. Past research shows that the link between school environment and student outcomes is tenuous compared to the link between classroom environment and student cognitive and affective outcomes. Moreover, it is probable that any effects the school-level environment has on student learning are mediated by classroom process variables, one of which is the quality of the particular classroom learning environment.

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Appendix A

SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT QUESTIONNAIRE

Instructions

There are 34 items in this questionnaire. They are statements about the school in which you work and your work environment.

Think about how well the statements describe your school environment.

Indicate your answer by circling:

SD	if you STRONGLY DISAGREE with the statement;
D	if you DISAGREE with the statement;
N	if you neither agree nor disagree with the statement or are not sure;
A	if you AGREE with the statement;
SA	if you STRONGLY AGREE with the statement

1. The school mission statement and its associated goals are well understood by school staff.
2. The administration team deals with staff in a relational rather than authoritarian manner.
3. There are many disruptive, difficult students in the school.
4. I seldom receive encouragement from colleagues.
5. The organisation of this school reflects its goals.
6. Teachers feel that they are authorised to make decisions in this school.
7. Most students are helpful and cooperative to teachers.
8. I feel accepted by other teachers.
9. Teachers regularly refer to the mission of the school when addressing school issues.
10. Actions by the administration team often support the view that teachers are the school's most important resource.
11. Most students are pleasant and friendly to teachers.
12. I am ignored by other teachers.
13. There is a high degree of consensus within the staff with regard to what the school is trying to achieve.
14. Staff efforts in this school are recognised by the administration team.
15. There are many noisy, badly behaved students.
16. I feel that I could rely on my colleagues for assistance if I should need it.
17. In this school, students receive a sound preparation for a moral life.
18. The administration team supports teachers on a consistent basis.
19. Students get along well with teachers.
20. My colleagues seldom take notice of my professional views and opinions.
21. My views of the overall mission of this school are very similar to other staff members.
22. Decisions about the running of the school are usually made by the principal or a small group of teachers.
23. Most students are well-mannered and respectful to the school staff.
24. I feel that I have many friends among my colleagues at this school.
25. This school is making a worthwhile contribution to the preparation of socially responsible adults.
26. I have to refer even small matters to a senior member of staff for final answer.
27. Very strict discipline is needed to control many of the students.
28. I often feel lonely and left out of things in the staffroom.
29. Some teachers in this school could try harder at supporting the goals of the school.
30. Teachers are frequently asked to participate in decisions concerning administrative policies and procedures.
31. The operation of this school is consistent with its goals.
32. I am encouraged to make decisions without reference to a senior member of staff.
33. I have very little say in the running of the school.
34. Teachers agree on the school's overall goals.

Scale allocations for School Environment Questionnaire:

Scale	Items
Mission Consensus	1, 5, 9, 13, 17, 21, 25, 29, 31, 34
Empowerment	2, 6, 10, 14, 18, 22, 26, 30, 32, 33
Student Support	3, 7, 11, 15, 19, 23, 27
Affiliation	4, 8, 12, 16, 20, 24, 28

CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT QUESTIONNAIRE

Instructions

This questionnaire contains 29 statements about practices which could take place in your present class. You will be asked how much you agree or disagree with each practice.

There are no right or wrong answers. Your opinion is what is wanted. All information is confidential and will not be used by your school or your teacher. Do not write your name on this paper.

Think about how well each statement describes what your actual classroom is like. Draw a circle around

SD if you STRONGLY DISAGREE with the statement;
D if you DISAGREE with the statement;
N if you neither agree nor disagree with the statement or are not sure;
A if you AGREE with the statement;
SA if you STRONGLY AGREE with the statement

1. Members of the class do favours for one another.
2. My teacher is fair when dealing with students.
3. Students cooperate with each other when doing assignment work.
4. A student has the chance to get to know all other students in the class.
5. My teacher is keen to see students do their best in the subject being taught.
6. Students compete rather than cooperate with their classmates.
7. Members of the class are personal friends.
8. The teacher goes out of his/her way to help students.
9. Practical work in groups is dominated by certain students.
10. All students know each other very well.
11. The teacher helps each student who is having trouble with the work.
12. Students share their books and other resources when researching an assignment.
13. Students are not in close enough contact to develop likes or dislikes for one another.
14. Our teacher is willing to forgive students for their failures.
15. When working in groups, there is teamwork.
16. The class is made up of individuals who do not know each other well.
17. My teacher will help me if I am having trouble with my work.
18. There is cooperation in our class.
19. Each student knows the other members of the class by their first names.
20. The teacher is unfriendly and inconsiderate towards students.
21. Students don't want to help others in the class.
22. Students enjoy working together in this class.
23. Our teacher talks to students who need help.
24. This class is competitive.
25. Some students in our class don't like each other.
26. My teacher gets on well with students in our class.
27. Most students in our class are willing to help students who are having trouble with their work.
28. When things go wrong, my teacher is honest about it.
29. Students want to know if they are doing better than others in the class.

Scale Allocations for Classroom Environment Questionnaire:

Scale	Items
Student Affiliation	1, 4, 7, 10, 13, 16, 19, 22, 25
Interactions	2, 5, 8, 11, 14, 17, 20, 23, 26, 28
Cooperation	3, 6, 9, 12, 15, 18, 21, 24, 27, 29

Scoring of items

Normal scoring is SD = 1; D = 2; N = 3; A = 4; SA = 5
Underlined items are reverse scored
i.e. SD = 5; D = 4; N = 3; A = 2; SA = 1